

German Reich

This article is about the German word **Reich**, and in particular its historical and political implications. For other uses, see **Reich** (disambiguation).

Deutsches Reich (German: [ˈdɔʏtʃəs ˈʁaɪç]) was the official name for the German nation state from 1871 to 1943 in the German language. It translates literally to “German Empire”, with a context approximating that of “German Realm”.^[1] From 1943 to 1945, the official name was – but not formally proclaimed – **Großdeutsches Reich** (“Greater German Reich”) on account of the new territories annexed into the state’s administration during the Second World War.

To refer to the entire period, the partially translated “German Reich” /ˈdʒɜːrmən ˈraɪk/, which has no monarchical connotations, is often used,^[2] with “German Realm” being a more appropriate direct translation of the official title.^[1] Informally, this nation was also known simply as **Germany**.

There were three periods in the history of the *Reich*:

1. First Reich (German: *Erstes Reich*): Holy Roman Empire (German: *Heiliges Römisches Reich*) 962–1806 later Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (German: *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*), also called Old Empire (German: *Altes Reich*)
2. Second Reich (German: *Zweites Reich*): German Empire (German: *Deutsches Kaiserreich*) 1871–1918
3. Third Reich (German: *Drittes Reich*): German Reich (German: *Deutsches Reich*) 1933–1943 later Greater German Reich (German: *Großdeutsches Reich*) 1943–1945

The 1918–1933 republic, which was also called German Reich, was ignored and denounced by the Nazis as a historical aberration. The name “Weimar Republic” was first used in 1929 after Hitler referred to the period as the “*Republik von Weimar*” (Republic of Weimar) at a rally in Munich with the term later becoming mainstream during the 1930s both within and outside Germany.^[3] The Nazis also contemptuously referred to it as “the System”.^[4]

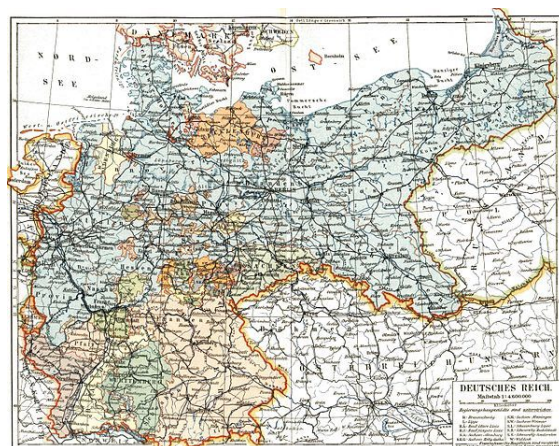
A 1923 book entitled *Das Dritte Reich* by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck^[5] counted the medieval Holy Roman Empire as the first and the 1871–1918 monarchy as the second, which was then to be followed by a “reinvigorated” third one.

1 Term

The name *Deutsches Reich* was occasionally applied in contemporary maps to the Holy Roman Empire (911–1806), also called “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” from the 16th century onwards, though it constituted a supranational entity extending beyond the frontiers of the German language area (*Sprachraum*). The first attempt to establish a “German Empire” during the 1848 March Revolution by the Frankfurt Constitution ultimately failed: it was aborted by the monarchs of the German Confederation, especially by the King of Prussia, fighting German nationalism, which then was tied to the idea of popular sovereignty.

Following the *Anschluss* annexation of Austria in 1938, Nazi Germany informally named itself the **Greater German Reich** (German: *Großdeutsches Reich*). This name was made the official state name only during the last two years (1943–45) of Nazi rule under Adolf Hitler,^[6] though the change was never proclaimed. After World War II, the denotation “German Reich” quickly fell into disuse in Allied-occupied Germany, however, the state’s continued existence remained a matter of debate (see below).

2 The difference between “Reich” and “Empire”



Deutsches Reich, 1893 map

See also: **Reich**

Though the German word *Reich* translates to the English word “empire” (it also translates to such words as “realm” or “domain”), this translation was not used throughout the full existence of the German Reich. Historically, only Germany from 1871 to 1918 — when Germany was under the rule of an emperor (*Kaiser*) — is known in English as the “German Empire” (*Deutsches Kaiserreich* in German historiography), while the term “German Reich” describes Germany from 1871 to 1945.^[2] As the literal translation “German Empire” denotes a monarchy, the term is used only in reference to Germany before the fall of the monarchies at the end of **World War I** in 1918.

After the unification of Germany, under the reign of the Prussian king **Wilhelm I** and his Chancellor **Otto von Bismarck**, the German states (e.g., the kingdoms of Prussia, Bavaria, and Saxony) were united, under imperial rule, by the Hohenzollern dynasty. On 18 January 1871, Wilhelm I was proclaimed German Emperor at the **Hall of Mirrors** in **Versailles**, the German Reich was officially declared *Deutsches Reich*, or “German Empire”,^[7] referring to the extinct Holy Roman Empire. On 14 April 1871, the **Reichstag** parliament passed the **Constitution of the German Empire** (*Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches*), which was published two days later.

However, originating from the **North German Confederation**, the Empire never comprised all “German” lands, excluding those **Cisleithanian** crown lands of **Austria-Hungary** which had been part of the German Confederation until 1865. The unification under Prussian leadership manifested Bismarck’s “Lesser German” solution of the German question after the **Austro-Prussian War** of 1866, realised with the support of his national liberal allies. On the other hand, the German Reich of 1871 comprised extended Prussian territories with large non-German sections of the population, like **Posen**, **West Prussia** or **Schleswig**.

Before and during the events of **World War I**, the German state was called an “empire” in English and **Wilhelm II** was titled “His Imperial and Royal Majesty The German Emperor.” After the War and the abolition of the monarchy during the **German Revolution of 1918–19**, however, when Wilhelm was forced to abdicate, the official English name for Germany was the “German Reich”: *Reich* was left untranslated and no longer referred to an “empire” but, instead, took on the connotation of “Realm” or “State”. “German Reich” was used in legal documents and English-language international treaties — for example, the **Kellogg–Briand Pact**^[8] and the **Geneva Conventions**.^[9] If the term “Empire” had still been considered valid at this point, it would have been used on these documents instead of “Reich”.

Apart from official documents, post-World War I Germany was referred to as the “German Reich” — never as “The German Empire” — for example, by British politicians^[10]—and the word “Reich” was used untranslated by Allied prosecutors throughout the **Nuremberg**

Trials, with “German Empire” only used to signify pre-1918 Germany.

That *Reich* was never translated to “Empire” after 1918 has to do with the lack of a precise equivalent in English. In German, *Reich* does not presuppose a monarchical form of government; but in English, the word “Empire” almost certainly does, even though the **Latin** word *imperium*, from which “empire” is derived, need not denote a monarchy. **Old English** had the word *rīc* which was cognate with *Reich*, but this word has long since fallen out of use, except perhaps in the compound “**bishopric**”.

2.1 End of World War II

On 8 May 1945, with the capitulation of the German armed forces, the supreme command of the **Wehrmacht** was handed over to the Allied Powers. The Allies refused to recognise **Karl Dönitz** as *Reichspräsident* or to recognise the legitimacy of his **Flensburg** government (so-called because it was based at **Flensburg** and controlled only a small area around the town) and, on 5 June 1945, the four powers signed the **Berlin Declaration** and assumed *de jure* supreme authority with respect to Germany.^[11] The declaration asserted the complete legal extinction of the **Third Reich** following death of **Adolf Hitler** on 30 April 1945, but the continued subsequent existence of a German national territory; although subject to the four signatory powers also asserting their authority to determine the future boundaries of Germany.

At the **Potsdam Conference**, Allied-occupied Germany was divided into **British**, **French**, **American** and **Soviet** occupation zones; while the Allied Powers exercised the state authority assumed by the Berlin Declaration in transferring the former eastern territories of the **German Reich** east of the **Oder-Neisse** line to the **Republic of Poland** and the **Soviet Union**.

2.2 Divided Germany

In its 1973 review of the previous year’s **Basic Treaty** between East and West Germany, the **German Federal Constitutional Court** (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) ruled that according to its **Basic Law** the **Federal Republic of Germany** (FRG) was partially identical with the **German Reich** and not merely its **legal successor**.^[12] The court further elaborated that the ‘partial identity’ of the FRG was limited to apply only within its current *de facto* territory; and hence the Federal Republic could not claim an **exclusive mandate** for the territory under the *de facto* government of the **German Democratic Republic**; “identity does not require exclusivity”. This was explained as being because the **German Democratic Republic** and the **Polish-** and **USSR-**occupied eastern territories were beyond FRG authority and because the Allied powers still had jurisdiction where “Germany as a whole” was concerned.

This claimed identity was however, contested by most other countries of the world. The three Western allies, the Soviet Union and most other Western countries regarded the German Reich as still being one nation — not synonymous with either the West or East German state but rather the two states in collective. Other countries tended to regard the German Reich to have been divided into two states. As of 1974, East Germany's official stance was that the GDR was a new state that is German in nature, a successor of the German Empire,^[13] and that there were then two German states that were different nations.

2.3 Reunified Germany

When the *Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany* between Germany and the wartime Allies was signed on 12 September 1990, there was no mention of the term *Deutsches Reich*, however the Allies paraphrased the international legal personality of Germany as “Germany as a whole” in the English version of the text. Instead the *states of the Federal Republic of Germany* (West Germany, FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, GDR) agreed to be bound by certain conditions which they had to ratify, one of which was the creation of a united Germany. On meeting these conditions under Article 7.2 “The United Germany [has] accordingly full sovereignty over its internal and external affairs.”^[14]

Under Article 1 of the Treaty on Final Settlement, the new united, Germany committed itself to renouncing any further territorial claims beyond the boundaries of East Germany, West Germany and Berlin; “The united Germany has no territorial claims whatsoever against other states and shall not assert any in the future.” Furthermore the Basic Law of the Federal Republic was required to be amended to state explicitly that full German unification had now been achieved, such that the new German state comprised the entirety of Germany, and that all constitutional mechanisms should be removed by which any territories outside those boundaries could otherwise subsequently be admitted; these amendments being bound by treaty not to be revoked. Article 23 of the Basic Law was repealed, closing off the possibility for any further states to apply for membership of the Federal Republic; while Article 146 was amended to state explicitly that the territory of the newly unified republic comprised the entirety of the German people; “This Basic Law, which since the achievement of the unity and freedom of Germany applies to the entire German people, shall cease to apply on the day on which a constitution freely adopted by the German people takes effect”. This was confirmed in the 1990 rewording of the preamble; “Germans..have achieved the unity and freedom of Germany in free self-determination. This Basic Law thus applies to the entire German people.” In place of the former Article 23 (under which the states of East Germany had been admitted), a new Article 23 embedded the accession of the Federal Repub-

lic to the European Union within the Basic Law; hence with the subsequent accession of Poland to the EU, the constitutional bar on pursuing any claim to territories beyond the *Oder-Neisse Line* was reinforced. In so far as the German Reich may be claimed to continue in existence as 'Germany as a whole', the *former eastern territories of Germany* in Poland and Russia are now definitively and permanently excluded from ever again being united within this Reich.

3 See also

- National colours of Germany
- Germany (disambiguation)
- Greater Germanic Reich, a conceptual entity that the Nazis planned to establish during World War II.

4 References

- [1] *Harper's magazine*, Volume 63. Pp. 593. The term “Reich” does not literally connote an empire as has been commonly assumed by English-speaking people, the term “*Kaiserreich*” literally denotes an empire – particularly a hereditary empire led by a literal emperor, though *Reich* has been used in German to denote the Roman Empire because it has a weak hereditary tradition. In the case of the German Empire, the official name was *Deutsches Reich* that is properly translated as “German Realm” because the official position of head of state in the constitution of the German Empire was officially a “presidency” of a confederation of German states led by the King of Prussia who would assume “the title of German Emperor” as referring to the German people but was not emperor of Germany as in an emperor of a state.
- [2] “Germany” in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.
- [3] Eva-Maria Schnurr (September 2014). “Der Name des Feindes: Warum heißt der erste deutsche Demokratie eigentlich “Weimarer Republik?””. 5/2014 (Der Spiegel - Geschichte 3 Hausmitteilung 137 Impressum ed.). Der Spiegel: 20.
- [4] Cornelia Schmitz-Berning: *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus*. 2. durchges. u. überarb. Aufl. Berlin 2007, ISBN 978-3-11-019549-1, pp. 597-598.
- [5] *The man who invented the Third Reich: the life and times of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck*. Npi Media Ltd. May 1, 1999. ISBN 978-0-75-091866-4.
- [6] Decree RK 7669 E of the Reichsminister and head of the Reich chancellery Hans Lammers, 26 June 1943.
- [7] “Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law with respect to Collisions between Vessels”. Brussels. 23 September 1910. — an example of a legal document in which Germany is officially referred to as “the German Empire”

- [8] “Full text of the Kellogg–Briand Pact”. 27 August 1928. Archived from the original on 2012-05-09.
- [9] “Full text of the Geneva Convention”. 27 July 1929.
- [10] “Speech by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain”. 17 March 1939.
- [11] *Declaration Regarding the Defeat of Germany and the Assumption of Supreme Authority by Allied Powers*, 5 June 1945
- [12] BVerfGE 36, 1: Verdict of the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*) regarding the East–West Basic Treaty — in German and in English, 31 July 1973
- [13] Donald M. McRae, *Canadian Yearbook of International Law* 2005, Vol. 43, University of British Columbia, Vancouver 2006, p. 431.
- [14] Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, U.S. Diplomatic Mission to Germany. Updated: November 2003

5 External links

- Administrative history of the German Reich (German)

6 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

6.1 Text

- **German Reich** *Source:* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Reich?oldid=763193799 *Contributors:* Roadrunner, Leandro, Wik, Scott Sanchez, Dimadick, PBS, Der Eberswalder, GreatWhiteNortherner, HangingCurve, OwenBlacker, Cairns, Saintswithin, Dbachmann, Michael Zimmermann, Jnestorius, Kwamikagami, Nk, Keriluamox, Antman, Stemonitis, MONGO, Hbdragon88, Rjwilmsi, Amire80, Olessi, Str1977, WhyBeNormal, Hairy Dude, RussBot, Retired username, Donbert, Silverhelm, Cromag, Sacxpert, SmackBot, Clpo13, Willicher, Srnc, Betacommand, Rex Germanus, Hebel, Il palazzo, Tamfang, Alphathon, Valenciano, MegA, TomHennell, Agathoclea, Bytwerk, BSI, Hottiger, Picaroon, Hyperboreios, Donaldpugh, LCpl, Pelagus~enwiki, JNZ, R-41, Blackbird 4, Thijs!bot, Escarbot, Oreo Priest, Smith2006, Vanjagenije, I like Burke's Peerage, JAnDbot, Deflective, Ujalm, 52 Pickup, VolkovBot, Indubitably, Firstorm, Abt-inb, NPrice, Meters, Mallerd, Apollo Augustus Koo, IdreamofJeanie, Orangerider, Yikrazuul, P. S. Burton, DragonBot, Ziko, Addbot, Shakescene, Lightbot, HerculeBot, Neohagrid, Yobot, AnomieBOT, Ufim, Xqbot, TinucherianBot II, Rotellam1, GrouchoBot, Bpselvam, Alvoos Uj, Schuhpuppe, SH9002, Nightsturm, Bernd Schwabe in Hannover, EmausBot, John of Reading, AvicBot, ZéroBot, Africai, Sundostund, IIIraute, SporkBot, I124123367890, Morgan Hauser, BioPupil, TRAJAN 117, ClueBot NG, MerIlwBot, Haigst-Mann, Marco-cappelle, Ages24, Wheeke, EricEnfermero, ZappaOMati, Charles Essie, Gode-Tor, ZH8000, Money money tickle parsnip, N0tron, ProKro, Nima teocile, Nick Mitchell 98, Uspzor, Esquivalience, Dday01, PRUSSIARUES, Hört vot betrone, KasparBot, Spikeballz, Scizzar, Uldra, Hubon, CCCVCCCC, InternetArchiveBot, AbeMag and Anonymous: 70

6.2 Images

- **File:Coat_of_Arms_of_Germany.svg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/da/Coat_of_arms_of_Germany.svg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* *Bekanntmachung über die farbige Darstellung des Bundeswappens.* Vom 4. Juli 1952. In: *Bundesanzeiger Nr. 169* vom 02. September 1952. *Original artist:*
- diese Datei: Jwnabd
- **File:Commons-logo.svg** *Source:* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4a/Commons-logo.svg> *License:* PD *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?
- **File:Deutsches_Kaiserreich_1893.jpg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7a/Deutsches_Kaiserreich_1893.jpg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* Meyers Konversationslexikon, 5. Auflage *Original artist:* Unknown
- **File:Edit-clear.svg** *Source:* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/f/f2/Edit-clear.svg> *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* The Tango! Desktop Project. *Original artist:* The people from the Tango! project. And according to the meta-data in the file, specifically: “Andreas Nilsson, and Jakob Steiner (although minimally).”
- **File:Flag_of_Germany.svg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/ba/Flag_of_Germany.svg *License:* PD *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?

6.3 Content license

- Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0